

Revisiting Gurnet Inn 5 Years After the No-Name Storm

By CHUCK STEVENSON



Gurnet Inn.

This month marks the 5th anniversary of the now famous 1991 "No Name Storm" that heavily damaged property and beaches all along the coast. One local landmark that suffered extensive damage was the Gurnet Inn on Gurnet Rd., which had been a popular summer destination for many years and one of the last links to an era when large and small inns and hotels were so common in this area. Along with my brothers, Mark and John, and sisters, Anne and Beth, I consider myself lucky to be associated with the Gurnet Inn. We have all worked and lived there at various times through the years, thanks to 2 great people, our aunt Jean Stevenson and her late husband, Jack. They have been our bosses, teachers, and friends for a long time. Today Mark is the manager of the inn, while the rest of us work part time in what have become familiar and comfortable surroundings for the whole family.

When you mention the Gurnet Inn, most people in the Duxbury and Marshfield area think of the popular bar and lounge. Before 1991, people from outside of this area who knew of the inn thought of vacations spent in a neat and tidy apartment only steps from the beach. Even as the Cape and more exotic destinations grew in popularity, the occupancy rate for the apartments was always 100% from the middle of June through Labor Day, with one week being the minimum stay for any guest. The gentleman who walked into the office one spring afternoon and used the opening line of "I suppose I have to wait for someone to die before I can get a reservation" was not as far off base as he might have thought. To be a returning guest for the 15th of 20th year was not at all uncommon, a true testament to Jack and Jean's hospitality and the many charms that the area and the inn offered. The guests came from all walks of

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life. The rich and not so rich, politicians, socialites, laborers, executives, lawyers, postmen, independent business people, foreign diplomats, retiree's, young as well as mature families, single parent families, local celebrities, and just plain folk returned year after year.

From as close as Marshfield and as far away as Wisconsin, they made the Gurnet Inn a part of their vacation plans every year to the point where a real sense of community and family developed among the guests. It was not uncommon for 2 and 3 generations of the same family to be guests at various times of the summer. The first thing many people wanted to know upon checking in was what other families that they had come to know on previous visits would also be guests during their stays, with some going so far as to arrange their reservations based on their friends reservations.

For approximately 100 years the Gurnet Inn had stood watch over Duxbury Beach. Originally a private residence known as the Gurnet House, it had undergone several transformations. First as a tea room, then a guest house which then became an inn with oceanfront dining on the first floor and guest rooms on the 2nd. The repeal of prohibition saw the barn along the street turned into a bar room which was eventually connected to the main building with the addition of a cocktail lounge complete with piano, easy chairs, couches and a juke box. The last major renovation occurred in the early 1950's when the guest rooms, dining room and kitchen in the main building were replaced by 8 efficiency apartment units for guests and an additional apartment which served as the office and owners residence. Each of the apartments ran from the front to the back of the building providing every unit with a direct ocean view. Finished with knotty pine interiors, each apartment came complete with separate bedrooms, bathrooms, living room/kitchen combinations. Fully furnished and tastefully decorated, each one had its own individual charm and personality.

One constant through all of these transformations had been the presence of the Cosgrove family and Jean Cosgrove Stevenson in particular. The Gurnet, as it is most commonly known (not to be confused with the lighthouse or the point!) was originally purchased by Jean's grandmother. Her mother and father, Pop and Maise, were the next owners. Jean's sister and brother-in-law, Louise and Bill Weldon, transformed the inn to the efficiency apartment units and shortly after that, Jean and her husband, Jack, purchased the inn, running it together as a team until Jack's death in 1989. Jean continues her ownership of the inn to this day and maintains the tradition of arriving in the spring to open the business and returning to Southern Pines, NC, in the fall after the inn has been closed for the winter. Interestingly enough in the "off season", Jean still works 7 days a week at the Mid-Pines Club resort hotel and golf course that her parents owned and operated until the 1970's. Through the years, there has been a Gurnet Inn connection formed with this golf rich part of North Carolina. Several former employees and apartment guests of Jack and Jean's have settled in the Southern Pines area through the years.

Severe weather is the norm when you live along the coast. Wind-whipped water can penetrate seemingly airtight seals around doors, windows and roofs. The threat of hurricanes, northeasters and flood tides are always real. The worst, the so-called 100 years storm, had been the Blizzard of 1978. Three relentless flood high tides had caused over \$90,000 worth of damage to the Gurnet Inn. Holes big enough to walk through had been punched into the walls along the waterfront. If we could survive that, everyone reasoned, we could survive anything.

That line of thinking changed on the afternoon and early evening of October 30, 1991. A northeaster that had been stirring at sea for several days slammed into the Massachusetts coast catching everyone by surprise. Some meteorologists claim that there was fair warning about the possible destructive force of this storm, but anyone with a vested interest along the oceanfront who is used to tracking storms for potential problems can tell you that the term "some beach erosion" does not translate into severe property damage. As I often did during a storm, I decided to swing by the Gurnet to check out the ocean on my way home after visiting my fiancée in Weymouth.

When I came upon the Duxbury police officer stationed in a jeep at the end of Gurnet Rd., I got my first clue that there was something very wrong. After identifying myself as Jean Stevenson's nephew and telling him I needed to check out the situation, his response left me puzzled. "When you get down there, I don't know where you're going to park, but you can't leave your car in the street." Why, I thought, would I leave my car in the street when there were 2 large parking lots at the inn to choose from? Well, my answer came as soon as I hit the straight away on Gurnet Rd. Beach sand covered everything except the road (which I later found out had to be cleared with a snow plow) looking like snow in the glow of my headlights.

It seemed as if Mother Nature had decided to move all of Duxbury Beach to the other side of the sea wall. Huge wooden beams that used to support houses, furniture from the inside of homes, pieces of houses that had been torn off by waves rolling over the sea wall everywhere. Houses across the street from the ocean that had suffered only minor basement flooding in the blizzard of '78, had front porches ripped off completely by the surf. The beach sand was piled so high at the big parking lot of the Gurnet Inn I could not see the front of the building or the sea wall. From the street side of the building everything seemed to be OK. Trying to enter the building off of the back porch, I was unable to open the door to the office. I then circled the back of the building and came around to the side yard.

Suddenly, every step brought sights to me eyes that my mind was having trouble comprehending. A glass faced metal kitchen wall cabinet was at the back corner of the side lawn resting next to a beach rose bush surrounded by bricks and dishes. A part of the cellar door was resting on a retaining wall while the ramp down to cellar was filled with water in which floated tool boxes,

supplies and a bird bath. Closer to the front of the building in the middle of the yard was an entire section of wall from an apartment kitchen resting on top of a refrigerator and stove. The section of wall was still tethered to the building by metal encased electrical wire. The memory of coming to the front of the building still seems unreal to this day. Every wall and window on the first floor along the front of the building was gone. The front porch that had run the length of the building on the 2nd floor was gone and a portion of the 2nd floor had collapsed into the first floor. The solid cement patio that ran from the sea wall to the building was shattered into pieces. At the northeast corner of the building the ocean had lowered the level of the land down 6 feet, undermining the foundation of the building. Shattered pieces of furniture were everywhere.



Surveying the storm damage at Gurnet Inn.

At next day's light, the total scope of the damage came into focus. The force of the water crashing into the front of the building had blown out the walls and all but 2 vertical support beams, buckled floors, blasted out the cellar and pushed the whole structure back over 6 inches off of its foundation. The reason I could not open the back door to the office the night before was simple, the building had been pushed back to the point that the door frames had been knocked out of alignment jamming the doors shut. While talking to my brother Mark, who was in North Carolina that winter, attempting to describe the scope of the damage, he asked me if I could retrieve a couple of his personal belongings from a first floor room that bordered the sea wall. "Mark, you don't understand," I told him, "that room isn't even there anymore." In the bar and lounge, most of the window locks sprang open due the force of the main building pushing these sections out of alignment. The entire 2nd floor of the main building was inaccessible, the stairs and front deck were gone. All of this damage was from one flood high tide, far surpassing the destructive force from the 3 high tides of the blizzard of 1978.

Any scheme to rescue part or all of the building, and there were several proposed, required much more of an investment than was available in insurance money, ultimately dooming the main part of the building. Extensive work was required just to save the bar and

lounge. The days immediately following the storm brought a steady stream of customers and friends with offerings of help and condolences. The moral support that we received during that time from so many good people is still very much appreciated by all of us to this day. Along with the good in people we also were exposed to the less than good. Items from the building, which was wide open along the sea wall, disappeared before we could secure them. One woman was indignant that my sister stopped her from walking off with items from an apartment kitchen on the first floor that she helped herself to. "After all," the woman explained to Anne, "your insurance will cover it," as if that allowed her to take someone else's private property. Balance that with the long time guest who burst into tears when she was given a snack tray from the apartment she had stayed in for 26 years by Jean when she came by to witness the damage. That nondescript tray occupies a place of honor in her kitchen to this day.

There are only 2 apartments now at the Gurnet Inn and they stand on the site of what was once a 2-room cottage. It's a simple 2-story building set back from the beach, with one apartment on each floor. They are occupied during the summer by people who used to stay in the old inn. In the building that houses the bar and lounge above what is the owner's kitchen, a living room and bedroom have been added that Jean Stevenson uses as her apartment. The bar and lounge themselves remain virtually intact and unchanged except for the large framed photo that was taken from a boat in August of 1991 by John Stevenson of the main building. That picture now hangs on the wall under the sail fish.

I like to say that if you sit in either room and don't look out the windows, you couldn't detect that anything



After the storm.

had changed since October of 1991. That is a little bit of lie however. If you take a close look at certain points inside the building, along the floor of the lounge and the ceilings in both rooms, you can see how the angles aren't quite right, certain walls bow out or doors and walls have moved ever so slightly and settled at weird angles. Except for the remains of the 2 retaining walls that led to the cellar, there is little or no sign of what was once the main building. Lots of trucked-in fill, some grass and a lot of rocks now take its place. The memories of very good times and even better people are another matter. They remain strong and vibrant as ever.

(The Oct. 30, 1991 No-Name Storm caused millions of dollars worth of damage to property and the beach.)